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SUBJECT: THE GOB SAYS IT IS SERIOUS ABOUT QAWMI MADRASA

REFORM (2 OF 3)

REF: A. DHAKA 239 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)B. DHAKA 419

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Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) After a rocky start, the Awami League government and Bangladesh's qawmi madrasa (QM) community appear to have laid the necessary groundwork for much-needed dialogue aimed at addressing problems related to the country's privately-funded unregulated Islamic education system. That said, the social distances and communication gaps between the qawmi madrasa community and the ruling elite are deep and the issues at hand complex, emotional and potentially divisive. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) This is Part 2 of a 3-part series of cables on Bangladesh's Deobandi qawmi madrasa (DQM) system. Part 1 (ref B) provides background on the Deobandi qawmi madrasas) their origin, curriculum and organizational structure in Bangladesh, their own perception of their social role and their demands of the Government of Bangladesh (GOB). This cable describes the GOB position on QM reform and the interaction between the GOB and the DQM community.

GOB IS SERIOUS ABOUT QAWMI MADRASA REFORM

[1](#)3. (C) Ref A reports on the stated desire of the Minister of Education to bring Bangladeshi QMs under the government's purview. Ministry staff recognize the significant challenge this entails, according to Mozammel Hoq, Joint Secretary for Madrasa & Technical Education at the Ministry of Education (MOE), who met with Poloff March 31, together with Mofizul Haque, Deputy Secretary for Madrasa Education, and Mohamed Yousef, Chairman of the Madrasa Board of Education, a semi-autonomous body attached to the MOE. Hoq, a civil servant previously assigned to the Ministry of Housing and Public Works, had only been on the job one month at the time of the meeting, however it was apparent that he, Haque and Yousef would be lead MOE actors on issues of qawmi madrasa reform.

[1](#)4. (C) "They are not interested in being under the government," Hoq said of the QM community, adding that the previous BNP government had made significant efforts to bring

them into the fold, but results were "zero." It would be a big challenge, but "We must bring them into our purview. They have to come," he stated. He and his colleagues maintained that the current government had the momentum and political will to succeed where previous administrations had failed.

15. (C) Hoq said the GOB planned to send out a survey to provincial government officials seeking information on QMs in their jurisdictions (Note: According to media, the MOE issued a directive April 14 to the country's 64 Deputy Commissioners, instructing them to research and provide information to the Ministry as to funding, size, location, syllabus and number of QMs in their areas of responsibility. A deadline of April 23 was imposed in the instruction. The survey results are not yet known. End note.) Once the survey was complete, said Hoq, MOE would sit down with representatives of the QM community to discuss next steps and possible models for eventual QM integration into the government system.

THE LAW MINISTER PUTS HIS FOOT IN IT

16. (C) Law Minister Ahmed Shafique nearly derailed the MOE's good intentions soon afterwards when he made critical public remarks which riled the QM community. In late March, law enforcement discovered an arms cache at a site in southern Bangladesh reportedly sponsored by Green Crescent, a UK-based NGO. After the site was labeled a "madrasa" in media reports, Shafique told media in widely reported comments that qawmi madrasas were "breeding grounds for terrorists." His comments unleashed a wave of public protests and demonstrations by the DQM community in Dhaka and other cities calling for his resignation. After a reported rebuke by the Prime Minister during a Cabinet meeting, Shafique claimed in a conciliatory

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meeting with QM representatives April 18 that he had been "misquoted."

17. (SBU) Note: Post's DQM interlocutors with connections to the area expressed indignation over the fact that the label "qawmi madrasa" was used to describe the "foreign" Green Crescent NGO operation in Bhola. The institution was not registered with any legitimate DQM education board and its leadership was not known to the local DQM community, they insisted. End note.

THE PRIME MINISTER MEETS WITH THE DQM COMMUNITY

18. (C) Concerned about continuing QM protests and aware of plans for a large-scale QM demonstration on April 20, Awami League Religious Affairs Secretary Mohammed Abdullah reached out to the DQM community and brokered an April 18 meeting for DQM leaders with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Abdullah told Poloff April 21. The GOB was concerned not so much by a large public rally by the legitimate DQM community, as by the possibility that such a rally could be used as cover by "other elements" with nefarious intent to cause chaos and ill-feeling and "make the government look bad," said Abdullah.

19. (C) Note: Abdullah, a Dhaka-based lawyer, told Poloff the Awami League recently established the post of Religious Affairs Secretary for the first time. He acknowledged he had no particular religious background, adding there was "almost no expertise of that kind" in the Awami League. Disconcertingly, he seemed very unfamiliar with the names and relative importance of the senior DQM personalities who attended the April 18 meeting with the PM. He also seemed anxious about the Embassy's position with regard to the PM's meeting with the QM community and appeared to fear a negative reaction. Poloff assured him the Embassy welcomed initiatives relying on dialogue and resolving differences via peaceful means, noting this issue in particular seemed to call for extended good-faith dialogue. End note.

¶10. (SBU) The PM met April 18 with a joint delegation of Bangladesh's two main (and rival) DQM education board conglomerations, Befaul Madaris Al Arabia (BMA) and the Federation of Qawmi Madrasa Boards (FQMB). (Ref B provides background on both and on the split between them.) The delegation, comprising 82 senior DQM community representatives, included several post contacts, among them Mufti Abdur Rahman of FQMB and Mohammed Abdul Jabbar of BMA. Abdul Jabbar told post the meeting was "fruitful" and included a discussion of ways the QM community could cooperate with the GOB in identifying and preventing militant activity. He said the Prime Minister suggested the DQM community form a joint BMA/FQMB commission to formulate their wishes and concerns regarding QM education and return to discuss their proposals with the GOB. BMA also agreed to cancel its planned April 20 protest as a token of good faith. (Note: There were no representatives of Bangladesh's much smaller Ahl-e-Hadith QM community at the meeting and their positions on the issues currently facing the QM community are not clear. End note.)

PM: MEETING WITH DQM REPS "A BREAKTHROUGH EVENT"

¶11. (C) The Prime Minister raised the subject of her meeting with the DQM community at an April 27 meeting with the Ambassador, acknowledging that the GOB always tended to blame QMs for extremism. She characterized her meeting with the DQM representatives as a breakthrough event and underlined the DQM promises of cooperation in helping root out extremist activities. She reiterated her support for the proposed DQM commission on QM curriculum reform issues. "That will mean a big change," she said, adding that by changing the curriculum and putting some money into the QMs, the GOB would be able to control the schools. She said the Finance Minister had agreed to budget funds for QMs, noting that under the current system, QMs were not receiving any GOB funding. The Ambassador said she was doing exactly the right thing and noted that many Embassy DQM contacts appeared ready to accept reform.

DIVISIONS WITHIN THE DQM COMMUNITY?

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¶12. (SBU) A deputy to Mufti Abdur Rahman told post April 21 that BMA and FQMB representatives met again shortly after their meeting with the PM, to decide the membership of the 11-member joint committee which would carry QM community proposals to the GOB for discussion. Although they initially reached consensus on a slate of five BMA and five FQMB individuals, plus one "neutral" member trusted by both sides, the agreement fell apart after argument erupted April 21 and the slate had yet to be finalized, the deputy said.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The social distance and communication gaps between the QM community and the ruling elite are enormously deep, and represent empty space easily exploited by extremist and anti-government elements. Many in the government (as in mainstream Bangladeshi society) appear to view the QM community as benighted barbarians living in a medieval parallel universe, with whom dialogue would be both pointless and dangerously legitimizing. The QM community, in its turn, views the ruling elite as corrupt and godless "leftists" out to destroy Islam.

¶14. (C) The Prime Minister's gesture in meeting with the DQM community on April 18 was a positive step and shows the government's awareness of the potential for social instability stemming from a threatened and discontented QM community. Many now hope the stage has been set for

meaningful dialogue on this high-stakes, complex and emotional issue. Further complications may stem from the potential for disunity within the QM community, however. If BMA and FQMB are unable to speak with a single voice, they risk not only undermining the QM interests they are trying to defend, but may also present the Awami League government with "divide and conquer" opportunities which, if seized, could prove divisive and counter-productive in the long term.

MORIARTY